

May 5, 2010

Statement by Congressman David R. Obey

In December I will have been in public service for 48 years – over 6 years in the Wisconsin State Legislature and almost 42 years in the U.S. Congress. I have served in the House longer than anyone in Wisconsin history. God and my constituents have been incredibly good to me.

When I was a kid growing up in Wausau I never dreamed that I would have even one-tenth of the opportunities that have come my way. I hope that I have used those opportunities to do the most that could be done for the causes I believe in: fairer taxes; greater economic opportunity; better schools; affordable health care; expanded education and health care benefits for veterans; research that will help us fight diseases like cancer, diabetes and Parkinson's; better health, safety, and economic security for workers; cleaner air; and water and preservation of National Parks and public places.

The people of Northern Wisconsin have given me the honor and the privilege of representing them on the great issues of our times, ranging from Vietnam to Watergate, the Iranian hostage crisis, the Reagan deficits, Iran-Contra, the collapse of communism, two Gulf Wars, the economic and budget reforms of the early 1990s, the government shut down, 9/11, and the economic meltdown of the past decade.

For a decade, as Chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, I had the privilege of helping lead the effort to meet our responsibilities to our fellow human beings around the globe who share this planet with us, but do not share our same good fortune. During that time, we consistently moved foreign aid money away from support of military dictators to the expansion of long-term development activities and through programs like UNICEF contributed to saving millions of children's lives.

I'm especially proud of the role I played in resisting American colonialism in Central America, working with people like James Baker, Dave Bonior, Jim Wright, Lee Hamilton, Matt McHugh, Joe Moakley, and Tom Foley to end the Contra War in Nicaragua. Probably, the most important historic role the committee played was the bipartisan work we did with the George H. Bush Administration and officials like Secretary Lawrence Eagleburger in helping Eastern European countries to transition from communist authoritarianism to Western capitalist democracies after the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Although it happened a long time ago, I am especially proud of the losing fight that I helped wage with Congressmen Henry Reuss and Mo Udall to prevent the passage of the fiscally irresponsible Reagan budgets, which at a time of devastating inflation cut taxes at the same time the defense budget was being doubled, all paid for with borrowed money, more than tripling the long-term budget deficit picture. The Obey-Udall-Reuss alternative budget was a progressive alternative to the budgets of both parties, which spent less, borrowed less, and produced smaller deficits than either the Democratic or Republican base bills, and won the support of a majority of Democrats. At the time our actions were hugely unpopular. About 70% of the voters in my district supported Reagan's budget, but time has proven us right.

Today, I am similarly proud that I was the principle author of the much maligned but absolutely essential Economic Recovery Act of 2009, which in the midst of the deepest and most dangerous economic catastrophe in 70 years, has pumped desperately needed purchasing power into the economy to cushion the fall and reduced the number of families whose breadwinners were thrown out of work. When it was passed last year, the American economy was losing 750,000 jobs per month. Last month, by contrast, the economy added 162,000 jobs, the largest increase in three years. That corner could not have been turned without the Recovery Act. My only apology is that it should have been larger, but it was the most that the system would bear at the time.

I am especially pleased to have had the privilege of presiding over the House when it passed the historic health insurance reform legislation three weeks ago. I have been waiting for that moment for 41 years and its arrival – finally – made all the frustrations of public life worth it.

During my Congressional service, I have also tried to do what I could to keep us out of misguided wars and I have fought to reform the political institutions – especially, the Congress – to improve the quality of their work and to strengthen public confidence in them. And despite the misguided and disastrously destructive decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court that have put the system of American elections on the auction block, I have worked to limit the influence of private money in elections that by definition should be public events.

I think that along the way I have made a difference for the district and state that I represent and for the country.

But there is a time to stay and a time to go. And this is my time to go. I hate to do it. There is so much that needs to be done. But, frankly, I am bone tired. When I first put my name on the ballot for the State Assembly in 1962, I was 23 years old. Now, 48 years later, I will soon be 72. When I went to Congress in 1969, I was the youngest member of the House of Representatives. I'm not anymore. Since that first day in 1962, I have gone through 25 elections and engaged in countless battles.

I'm ready to turn the page, and I think, frankly, that my district is ready for someone new to make a fresh start. Not someone who poses as a fresh face, but would in reality take us back to the "good old days" of Bush tax cuts for the rich and a misguided Iraq war. Not someone whose idea of a fresh idea is to say: "Let the market do it," which translated means: "Let the corporate elites, big banks, and Wall Street big shots and insurance company CEO's do anything they want with no regulation to protect investors and consumers." There is nothing fresh about that. No, what the 7th district deserves and what the country deserves is for someone to step up who can be counted on to put working people first, someone who will bring fresh eyes and fresh energy to the battle, someone who won't use slick words and an actor's ability to hide the fact that he is willing to gut and privatize Social Security and Medicare and abandon working people to the arbitrary power of America's corporate and economic elite.

When I first ran for Congress I wanted to do three things:

- 1) The first was to help make our economic system more fair for the poor and for middle class

working families. Unfortunately, powerful economic and political forces have largely frustrated that effort. Over the last 30 years we have seen the largest transfer of income up the income scale in history. In fact, for six straight years under George W. Bush, over 90% of all the income growth in the country went into the pockets of the wealthiest 10%. The other 90% of the population – the regular people of the country – got table scraps. I regret not being able to do more to turn that around. That, and the inability of the political system to achieve the public financing of political campaigns, represent the biggest disappointments of my public life.

2) My second goal was to expand federal support for education in order to expand opportunity for every American. That has been a hard slog, but, especially in the last three years, we have been able to move a large amount of federal resources to do just that. Just this last year, we were able to greatly enhance federal support for student aid. It is not enough, but it makes a difference.

3) My third goal was to help move this country into the ranks of civilized nations by making it possible for almost every American to receive quality health care without begging. For years I despaired of ever getting that done. But last month, I had the great privilege of presiding over the House of Representatives as it finally completed action on historic health insurance reform legislation.

Over the past few years, whenever a member of the press asked if I was contemplating retirement, I would respond by saying that I did not want to leave Congress until we had passed health care reform. Well, now it has. And I can leave with the knowledge that thanks to Speaker Pelosi and President Obama and so many others, we got the job done. I haven't done all the big things that I wanted to do when I started out, but I've done all the big things I'm likely to do.

Frankly, I had considered retiring after the 2000 election, but I became so angered by the policies of the Bush administration that I decided to stick around as long as he was here. In 2002, after a year-long reapportionment struggle, which devoured my time and the time of my colleague Jim Sensenbrenner, I publicly stated I would not be around for another one. That is exactly what I would face if I returned to Congress next year. I simply don't want to do it.

Many years ago, in an interview with Richard Cohen, I told him that the way I looked at public service, I believe the job of a good politician was to be used up fighting on behalf of causes you believed in, and when you are used up, to step aside and let someone else carry on the battle. Well, today I feel used up.

In the last months, two colleagues, Charlie Wilson and Jack Murtha, have died. Both were 76. For me, that is only four years away. At the end of this term I will have served in the House longer than all but 18 of the 10,637 men and women who have ever served there. The wear and tear is beginning to take its toll. Given that fact, I have to ask myself how I want to spend the time I have left. Frankly, I do not know what I will do next. All I do know is that there has to be more to life than explaining the ridiculous, accountability destroying rules of the Senate to confused, angry, and frustrated constituents.

I absolutely believe that, after the economy returns to a decent level of growth, we must attack our long-term budget deficit. But, perhaps I expect too much because, in addition to an attack on the federal budget deficit, I also want to see an equal determination to attack the family security deficit, the family income deficit, and the opportunity deficit which also plague the American people.

I am, frankly, weary of having to beg on a daily basis that both parties recognize that we do no favor for the country if we neglect to make the long-term investments in education, science, health, and energy that are necessary to modernize our economy and decline to raise the revenue needed to pay for those crucial investments. I do not want to be in a position as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee of producing and defending lowest common denominator legislation that is inadequate to that task and, given the mood of the country, that is what I would have to do if I stayed.

I am also increasingly weary of having to deal with a press which has become increasingly focused on trivia, driven at least in part by the financial collapse of the news industry and the need, with the 24-hour news cycle, to fill the air waves with hot air. I say that regretfully because I regard what is happening to the news profession as nothing short of a national catastrophe which I know pains many quality journalists as much as it pains me. Both our professions have been coarsened in recent years and the nation is the loser for it.

Let me close by thanking some people.

First, let me thank my wife, Joan, who has put up with so much and endured so much so that I might follow my dream of public service. When she agreed to marry me, she thought she was getting a college teacher. Instead, she got stuck with the “charms” of political life. Whatever good I’ve done, I could not have done without her.

Let me also thank my two sons, Craig and Douglas, who have also shared in the burden of public service. Craig has spent his adult life trying to bring health care to people who needed it, trying to protect workers in the work place, and trying to protect our precious public lands from abuse by special interests and their mouthpieces in government. Doug has spent his life as a working journalist, first covering Capitol Hill, and then informing his readers about the realities of the politics of environmental protection and the interaction between science and politics on the profoundly important issue of global climate change.

Let me thank all those who have worked with me as staff through the years – those who have worked in my district offices in Wisconsin, in my personal office in Washington, my Joint Economic Committee staff, and my Appropriations Committee staff. Your ability, your decency, and your fierce loyalty to me are gratefully appreciated. You have been not just my counselors, but my protectors, and my understanding friends.

Let me thank those special friends who have helped me get through 25 elections and everything that has happened in between. You know who you are. By giving me your political and emotional support, you have sustained me through the pressures and the ups and downs of political and public life. I will not forget. I hope you feel that your support helped to make

possible whatever good I have done through the years.

Let me thank Bob Huber, Frank Nikolay, Dick Bolling, and Gaylord Nelson for teaching me how to be a legislator – in Madison and in Wisconsin. And let me express a special thanks to Speaker Nancy Pelosi whose heart, guts, and soul have provided the steel necessary to accomplish some extraordinary things.

Let me also thank so many of my Congressional colleagues, past and present, who have worked shoulder to shoulder with me in pursuit of so many causes – some won, some lost, and who have on occasion forgiven me for my excessive passion. It has been said that in life our strength can also be our weakness as I have demonstrated on more than one occasion.

And let me profoundly thank everyone who has ever cast a vote for me for the privilege of representing you in Madison and Washington all these years.

I hope that in whatever years I may have remaining, I will still find occasion to help move the needle forward. But for now, after 48 years, it is time to pass the torch.